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ABSTRACT

Western regional writing provides a valuable resource for scholars and teachers. In their accounts of the populating of the West and the effects of that population, Western writers suggest questions that might be asked of any region--questions of skill, culture, race, environment, scenery, and progress. If the genre deals with these matters to a degree greater than that of other regional literatures, it nonetheless demonstrates to writers and readers of works about those other regions how place affects the substance of a literary work. The West, obviously, is a unique region, possessing a singular climate, scenery, historical past, and present. Its writers take care to assure that their readers are aware of the region's cultural, intellectual, and emotional continuity. Yet other regions possess a comparable uniqueness, and the study of their particular authors could provide readers with an awareness corresponding to that given by Western writers. In that awareness resides the final justification of regional studies: for it is in learning of the specific that people come to understand the general. (Author/RL)

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Western Regionalism and Awareness of Place

Everything in literature happens somewhere. This is a truth so basic that we usually overlook its significance. Yet the significance remains. Every event, like Stephen Crane's sin, is the result of a collaboration--the collaboration of action, actors, and setting. Action and actors, to be sure, are essential. Yet what would "The Blue Hotel" be without the emptiness of Romper, Nebraska, and the blizzard that howls outside; "Heart of Darkness," without the contrast between the yacht anchored snugly in the Thames and the wilderness embracing Marlow's tin-pot steamer; The Maltese Falcon without the fogs and streets of San Francisco; or the mystical world of Narnia without C.S. Lewis's evocation of its verdant landscapes? Action and actors are essential, but place is fundamental.

All literature incorporates place, but some works focus more clearly upon place and its effects than do others. These works constitute one of the most fruitful and most neglected bodies of writing extant: regional literature. This is, as George R. Stewart has written, literature that can be said "not only to be nominally located in the region but also to derive actual substance from that location. This substance will be derived from two sources. In the first place, it will come from the natural background--the climate, topography, flora, fauna, etc.--as it affects human life in the region. In the second place, it will come from the particular

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modes of human society which happen to have been established in the region and to have made it distinctive."[1] That is, regional literature deals with the customary materials of all literature: men and women, time and place. But it deals with them in ways that give the reader an understanding of a more specific, organic relationship, a relationship tied to the specific time and locale.

Within the realm of regional writing, Western American literature stands out. This literature, like regional writing in general, has many forms: the pulp Western familiar to us all from its film and television versions; the serious Western, which uses the sand-and-sixgun formula to say something about humanity; the story that draws its essence from the Western landscape and Western society; and others. Whatever its specific form, though, the Western regional work is valuable to the teacher and student of literature. Within a comparatively limited framework of time and space, it provides a dramatic, convenient, and effective way of illustrating qualities present in all regional literature, and, in many respects, present in all literature.

As one approaches the study of Western regional literature, two questions come immediately to mind. One is mechanical: <u>What is Western regional literature</u>? The answer is straightforward. It is a body of writing that focuses upon the American West--that part of the continent west of the Mississippi River--or upon the qualities of character (individualism, endurance, etc.) associated with the West. It is writing that considers the landscape of that region, the human society that has developed within the area in general and portions of it in particular, and the ways in which that specific, limited society meshes with the

greater sweep of human history. In the process, it relates the ways in which landscape, character, and circumstance work together, so that the careful reader comes away from the story with a visual sense of the setting and a profound awareness of the psychic impact of that setting upon the characters who populate it and the actions in which they engage.

The second question that confronts the person working with Western regional literature is utilitarian: How can I use this literature? The answer is obvious. In many ways. Perhaps the simplest is to use it to illustrate the special skills and aptitudes necessary for survival in the West. Jack Schaefer's The Canyon (1953) presents one instance of this, describing how a crippled Indian brave must employ the resources of a sealed box canyon to keep himself alive. Owen Wister's The Virginian (1902) presents another, focusing upon the trials of its nameless Eastern narrator and his efforts to earn the acceptance of the Westerners in and around Medicine Bow. In each case, a particular individual, having particular skills and limitations, confronts the circumstances of the West, and survives.

Somewhat more complex is the way in which Western regionalism illustrates the interweaving of cultures. A part of the West's population is, to be sure, indigenous. A greater part, though, is, in Wallace Stegner's phrase, "imported"--imported not only from England or Europe, but imported from an already established American culture elsewhere on the continent.[2] Thus, in the literature of the American West, one finds recorded the diverse reactions of diverse cultures. Some of these cultures are truly imported. Willa Cather, for example, bases many of her works upon the problems arising from the confrontation of Slavic ways and Western imperatives; her My

Antonia (1918) is a case in point. The British author Nevil Shute presents an even more intriguing instance of importation in Beyond the Black Stump (1956), the story of an American geologist who brings home an Australian fiancee, and the cultural ironies that result. Other cultures are blends. Frederic Remington's John Ermine of the Yellowstone (1902) considers the tensions imposed upon a young white who has been raised as an Indian, and Paul Horgan, in The Thin Mountain Air (1977), gives a poignant sketch of the Spanish-German aristocrat, Don Elizario Wenzel, whose time has passed him by. Still others are totally American, yet no less diverse. Stegner's own Angle of Repose (1970) suggests the divisions inherent in American life as it relates the lengthy and largely futile struggle of Eastern-born Susan Burling Ward to adapt to the Western scenes and ways so familiar to her engineer husband. In each instance, however, the interplay of cultures is a central part of the book, shedding light on the peculiar human circumstances of the West.

More complex still is the regional writer's incorporation of environmental concerns into Western literature. This is, one finds upon reflection, not surprising. The physical environment of the American West is the region's most familiar and most striking quality; mention "West," and one thinks immediately of John Ford's Monument Valley, the snowy peaks of the Rockies, and the deserts of Arizona and Nevada. Indeed, so tied is Western writing to the physical environment that the genre takes its name not from its literary characteristics (as in "Gothic"), but rather from the region itself. The "Western," as literary form, needs no definition.

Environmental awareness in Western writing appears in three forms. The first, and most common, emphasizes the visual nature of the region. It is a region of impressive scenery, and Western authors make good use of its variety. A.B. Guthrie's The Big Sky (1947) gains much of its impact from its evocation of the majesty of the Rockies. John Graves gives his Goodbye to a River (1960) a distinctive atmosphere by recording the changing landscapes he encounters as he canoes along the Brazos River. The presence of fog, sea, and tide pools adds another dimension to John Steinbeck's comic Cannery Row (1945). All three authors, obviously, are conscious of the visual, scenic variety of the West, and all three--and others like them--incorporate that variety into their writings.

Scenery, however, is more than a stage setting, as the second use of landscape suggests. Because the West is a region of unusual landscapes, it exerts a particular influence upon those persons who inhabit it. It is, for example, a spacious region; the residents of The Virginian's Medicine Bow and the military men of Horgan's A Distant Trumpet (1962) accept journeys of three days or more as a matter of course, accommodating their lives to the distances of the West with little thought. But space works in other ways, as well. The schoolmaster of Guthrie's Arfive (1971) feels himself diminished by the magnitude of Western space, and a lonely wife in the same author's These Thousand Hills (1956) is driven almost to madness by the solitude that Western distances impose. Clearly, while a part of the West's impact upon its inhabitants is visual, that visual perception carries a psychic impact, as well.

If the landscape has an effect upon humanity, humanity has an effect upon the landscape, as the third use of Western landscape in

regional writing suggests. Because it is intimately tied to the physical environment, Western literature is peculiarly sensitive to the ways in which humanity has affected that environment. In recent years, with increased attention being given to environmental concerns, Western writing has proven itself a particularly effective vehicle for the expression of environmental issues. One finds hints in a work as early as The Virginian, as Wister writes of the trash heaps that mark human settlements. More recent authors, though, make environmentalism the focus of their works. Guthrie, in Arfive, speaks eloquently of the depredations of the railroad and the mining interests. Schaefer, in Mavericks (1967) and An American Bestiary (1975), records the coming of air pollution, nuc r testing, and the interstate highway, and goes on to acknowledge his own complicity, as individual and as artist, in the destruction of the region. Most eloquent of all is Edward Abbey, whose The Monkey Wrench Gang (1975) is a comic yet agonizing cry of protest at the environmental pillaging he sees all about him. In Western writing, to a degree found in no other form of regional writing, one comes to see the way in which mankind has imposed itself upon the landscape.

That imposition leads to the last, and most complex, way that one might use Western regional writing. The genre, particularly in recent years, is an impressive record of the nature and cost of social progress. As its stories unfold, they document the ways in which change, posing as progress, has exacted its toll from the West and its people. Progress may be associated with the coming of the city or the military; Abbey's The Brave Cowboy (1956) and Fire on the Mountain (1962) deal, respectively, with each. One tells of the inexorable hunting down and destruction of Jack Burns,

the last cowboy; the other narrates an old rancher's futile efforts to keep the Air Force from absorbing his ranch into its missile range. Progress may come in the form of dams; Graves's Goodbye to a River and Abbey's The Monkey Wrench Gang delineate the ways in which dams--admittedly built for such nominally admirable purposes as flood control or the creation of recreational lakes--have destroyed one way of life and replaced it with another. Progress may even come in the guise of education and sophistication, yet, as Cather's The Professor's House (1925) suggests, may still work as a pernicious and debilitating force. Western regional writing, therefore, offers an opportunity to consider what, exactly, constitutes progress, and the degree to which the long-term cost of that progress justifies the short-term comforts that it may bring to its immediate consumers.

Western regional writing, in sum, provides a valuable resource for scholar and teacher alike. In its accounts of the populating of the West and the effects of that population, it suggests questions that may well be asked of any region: questions of skill, culture, race, environment, scenery, and progress. If the genre deals with these matters to a degree greater than that of other regional literatures, it nonetheless demonstrates how writers and readers of those other regions can look about them and see the ways in which their place has worked with them to create the world that they know. The West, obviously, is a unique region. Its world encompasses climate and scenery, historical past and imperative present, and its writers take care to assure that their readers are aware of the region's cultural, intellectual, and emotional continuity. Yet other regions possess a comparable uniqueness, and the study of

their particular authors provides the reader with an awareness corresponding to that given by the Western writers. In that awareness resides the final justification for regional studies, for it is in learning of the specific that we come to understand the general, comprehending at last the ways in which the regions of the nation, individuals in their own right, nonetheless share in the qualities that make up a truly United States.

Notes

[1]George R. Stewart, "The Regional Approach to Literature," in Western Writing, ed. Gerald W. Haslam (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1974), p. 42. Originally published in 1948.

[2]Wallace Stegner, "Born a Square," The Sound of Mountain Water (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), p. 178.

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November, 1979

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